

Istook Questions Foreign Language Requirements

Washington, DC – Congressman Ernest Istook (R-OK) Thursday pressed the Bush Administration to reverse an overlooked Clinton Administration policy, before the public is overwhelmed and burdened by massive cost and red tape. Federal policy recommendations range from changing road signs to hospitals using wireless remote headsets with translators miles away to simultaneously interpret between patient and doctor.

The new policy basically requires Americans who do business with the federal government to provide a translator for customers who don't read and speak English. Istook says Congress will probably raise a ruckus if the new Administration doesn't reverse the policy.

Istook raised the issue at an appropriations hearing for the White House agency which is the clearinghouse for federal rules and regulations, the Office of Management and Budget. Istook says the new policy also includes expensive requirements for multiple federal agencies to enforce the requirement for their customers to provide translators. Numerous federal agencies issued so-called "policy guidances" after former President Clinton issued Executive Order 13166 last August, which received little attention because it happened at the time of the Democratic National Convention. Istook said the so-called "policy guidances" are actually major federal regulations, because they create rules for the general public, not for internal agency policy.

Istook notes that the requirement to provide translators was also based on earlier court rulings which last month were overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The order instructs every federal agency to "implement a system by which LEP [Limited English Proficiency] persons can meaningfully access" their services. The order requires that federal grant recipients, service providers, and contractors also comply.

Istook quoted examples of the new requirements, as published in the official Federal Register:

The Department of Justice states that the order applies to all of the over ninety federal agencies; all who receive assistance, grants, loans, donations or training; and all who contract with the agencies to provide assistance.

The Department of Transportation encourages recipients to use signs with symbols rather than language and to minimize text such as "Massachusetts Avenue" and replace it with numbers, letters, or colors such as D2, L6, or Blue Line.

The General Services Administration's guidelines stipulates that blind vendors will lose their leases in federal buildings if they don't provide oral and written translations.

"These new rules are a formula for confusion, expense and resentment. Americans are friendly people, and most try to help anyone who doesn't speak English; the government shouldn't resort to force, the threat of lawsuits and loss of government business to pressure its own citizens. Yet that's what this policy does. It also overlooks the law that says those who become American citizens are required to read and write simple English. There's not enough professional translators to do all this work, because these rules frown on using volunteers. These rules will require a new mountain of red tape, which promises to be a lot taller than the Tower of Babel."